

Curriculum Jumpstarts Healthy Habits in South Carolina's Preschoolers

Issue

As director of Advent Children's Center in Spartanburg, S.C., Kathie Borowski grew accustomed to preschoolers unpacking potato chips and honey buns at lunchtime. For the past several years, the school, which serves 145 infants through 4-year-olds, has enrolled at least one severely overweight child per term.

In South Carolina, 26% of low-income children between 2 and 5 years old are overweight or at risk of becoming overweight. Type 2 Diabetes, previously considered an adult disease, increased dramatically in overweight children. One result: the state's obesity-related medical costs topped \$1 billion in 2003.

Intervention

The South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) is working to stop these alarming statistics in their tracks. Thanks to an investment of \$12,540 from the PHHS Block Grant that funded the entire pilot program, children and parents like the ones from Advent Children's Center in Spartanburg are now learning the importance of healthy eating habits and physical activity through an initiative called Color Me Healthy. The nutrition and physical activity education curriculum designed for 4- and 5-year-olds teaches children through lively, interactive classroom lessons. Parents are engaged through newsletters featuring nutritious recipes and take-home activity bags filled with jump ropes and balls.

During the pilot year in South Carolina, the following was accomplished:

- To reach disparate populations, such as low-income families and African-Americans, DHEC collaborated with the Congregational Nursing Program of the Spartanburg Area, a faith-based program that uses registered nurses to provide health-related education;
- A public health educator from Spartanburg County, one of the state's most populated areas, attended the national training for Color Me Healthy and was certified as the state training coordinator; and
- Sixty teacher kits were bought and distributed to teachers statewide.

Impact

At Advent Children's Center, preschoolers are now excited about munching on crunchy vegetables; parents participated in healthy cooking classes; and, at parents' request, structured physical education time has doubled to two 30-minute periods per week. Similar improvements throughout the state include:

- More than 7,660 children in rural and urban areas participated in Color Me Healthy. The program reached Head Start programs, faith-based and public preschools, and private day care centers.
- Seventy parish nurses were trained, reaching 50 Spartanburg County churches, including African Methodist Episcopal, Baptist and Presbyterian. Other congregational nursing programs throughout the state have expressed interest in Color Me Healthy; and a training session is planned for Columbia.
- Fifteen regional representatives statewide were trained in the curriculum; they, in turn, have trained approximately 383 childcare providers and preschool teachers in communities across the state. The process is ongoing in an effort to offer the program to as many S.C. preschoolers as possible.

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